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Adult haematopoietic stem cells lacking Hif-1 α self-renew normally

Milica Vukovic^{1,#}, Catarina Sepulveda^{1,#}, Chithra Subramani^{1,#}, Amélie V. Guitart¹, Jasmine Mohr¹, Lewis Allen¹, Theano I. Panagopoulou¹, Jasmin Paris¹, Hannah Lawson¹, Arnaud Villacreces¹, Alejandro Armesilla-Diaz¹, Deniz Gezer^{1,2,3}, Tessa L. Holyoake³, Peter J. Ratcliffe⁴ & Kamil R. Kranc^{1,*}

¹MRC Centre for Regenerative Medicine, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

²Klinik fuer Haematologie, Onkologie und Stammzelltransplantation, Universitaetsklinikum Aachen, Aachen, Germany

³Paul O'Gorman Leukaemia Research Centre, Institute for Cancer Sciences, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

⁴Nuffield Department of Clinical Medicine, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

These authors contributed equally to this work

*Corresponding author:

Kamil R Kranc, MRC Centre for Regenerative Medicine, 5 Little France Drive,
University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK
E-mail: kamil.kranc@ed.ac.uk

Running title: HSCs self-renew without Hif-1 α

Key points:

- *Hif-1α* is dispensable for cell-autonomous HSC survival
- HSCs do not require intrinsic *Hif-1α* to respond to haematopoietic injury

Abstract

The haematopoietic stem cell (HSC) pool is maintained under hypoxic conditions within the bone marrow (BM) microenvironment. Cellular responses to hypoxia are largely mediated by hypoxia-inducible factors, Hif-1 and Hif-2. The oxygen-regulated alpha subunits of Hif-1 and Hif-2 (namely, Hif-1α and Hif-2α) form dimers with their stably expressed beta subunits, and control the transcription of downstream hypoxia-responsive genes to facilitate adaptation to low oxygen tension. An initial study concluded that *Hif-1α* is essential for HSC maintenance, whereby *Hif-1α*-deficient HSCs lost their ability to self-renew in serial transplantation assays. In another study, we demonstrated that *Hif-2α* is dispensable for cell-autonomous HSC maintenance, both under steady-state conditions and following transplantation. Given these unexpected findings, we set out to revisit the role of *Hif-1α* in cell-autonomous HSC functions. [Here we demonstrate that inducible acute deletion of *Hif-1α* has no impact on HSC survival. Notably, unstressed HSCs lacking *Hif-1α* efficiently self-renew and sustain long-term multilineage haematopoiesis upon serial transplantation.](#) Finally, *Hif-1α*-deficient HSCs recover normally after hematopoietic injury induced by serial administration of 5-fluorouracil. We therefore conclude that despite the hypoxic nature of the BM microenvironment, *Hif-1α* is dispensable for cell-autonomous HSC maintenance.

Introduction

Haematopoietic stem cells (HSCs) reside in hypoxic bone marrow (BM) niches where they self-renew and sustain life-long multilineage haematopoiesis¹⁻³. Cellular responses to hypoxia are predominantly mediated by hypoxia-inducible factors, Hif-1 and Hif-2 that facilitate the transcription of hypoxia-responsive genes. Several studies employed a conditional gene knockout strategy to determine the role of *Hif-1α* and *Hif-2α* in HSC functions^{4,5}. An initial study concluded that inducible *Hif-1α* deletion from the mouse haematopoietic system results in the progressive loss of HSCs upon serial transplantation⁴, indicating that *Hif-1α* is required for HSC maintenance⁴. We demonstrated that constitutive or inducible haematopoiesis-specific *Hif-2α* deletion did not affect HSC maintenance⁵. Surprisingly, co-deletion of *Hif-1α* and *Hif-2α* had no impact on HSC numbers, steady-state haematopoiesis nor reconstitution upon transplantation⁵. These unexpected findings gave rise to the hypothesis that *Hif-1α* may not be as essential for HSC maintenance as previously suggested⁴. [Here, using serial transplantation assays, we demonstrate that unstressed HSCs do not critically require *Hif-1α* to survive and self-renew.](#)

Materials and Methods

Mice. *Hif-1α^{fl/fl}*, *Mx1-Cre* and *Vav-iCre* mice have been described previously⁶⁻⁸ and were of C57BL/6 genetic background. Sex-matched 8 to 12 week old mice were used. Animal experiments were authorised by UK Home Office.

FACS analysis. Analysis and sorting was done using BD LSRFortessa™ cell analyzer and BD FACSAriaII cell sorter. [Antibodies \(Suppl. Table 1\) were used as described previously⁹⁻¹¹.](#) [Representative gating is shown in Suppl. Fig. 1.](#)

Transplantation assays. 500,000 CD45.2⁺ test donor unfractionated BM cells were injected intravenously into lethally irradiated (10 Gy) CD45.1⁺/CD45.2⁺ congenic recipients alongside 500,000 CD45.1⁺ competitor unfractionated BM cells. Conditional gene deletion was achieved by administration of six intraperitoneal plpC injections over the period of 10 days, every other day (GE Healthcare; 0.3 mg per dose). For LSK cell transplantation assays, 3,000 LSK cells sorted from donor BM were transplanted together with 200,000 CD45.1⁺ unfractionated BM cells.

Statistical analysis. Statistical significance was determined using Mann-Whitney or Mantel-Cox tests.

Results and Discussion

We acutely deleted *Hif-1α* specifically within the haematopoietic system using *Mx1-Cre*^{5,9} (Fig. 1A). Given that *Mx1-Cre* recombines within the haematopoietic system, BM microenvironment and extramedullary tissues^{7,12}, we first transplanted unfractionated BM from untreated CD45.2⁺ *Hif-1α^{fl/fl};Mx1-Cre* and control (*Hif-1α^{+/+}* without *Mx1-Cre* or *Hif-1α^{fl/fl}* without *Mx1-Cre*) mice into wild-type (WT) lethally irradiated syngeneic recipients (Fig. 1A). Following reconstitution (Fig. 1B), recipients received plpC 8 weeks after transplantation, and were analysed 2 weeks later. Peripheral blood (PB) analyses of the plpC-treated recipients revealed that deletion of *Hif-1α* (Fig. 1C) had no impact on CD45.2⁺ donor-derived chimerism (Fig. 1D) and multilineage haematopoiesis in the BM (Fig. 1E), and spleen (Suppl. Fig. 2). The contribution of donor-derived cells to Lin⁻Sca-1⁻c-Kit⁺ (LK), Lin⁻Sca-1⁺c-Kit⁺ (LSK), LSKCD48⁻CD150⁺ HSC, LSKCD48⁻CD150⁻ multipotent progenitor (MPP), LSKCD48⁺CD150⁻ haematopoietic progenitor cell-1 (HPC-1) and LSKCD48⁺CD150⁺ HPC-2 compartments was also comparable (Fig. 1F-G). Therefore, acute deletion of *Hif-1α* has no immediate impact on HSC survival and multilineage haematopoiesis.

To test the self-renewal capacity of *Hif-1α*-deficient (*Hif-1α^{Δ/Δ}*) HSCs we performed competitive serial transplantation assays with sorted CD45.2⁺LSK cells from primary recipients 2 weeks after plpC treatment (Fig. 1A). LSK cells from primary recipients efficiently reconstituted short-term and long-term haematopoiesis in secondary recipients (Fig. 1H). 16 weeks after transplantation, sustained *Hif-1α* deletion was confirmed (Fig. 1I), and *Hif-1α^{Δ/Δ}* LSK cells efficiently contributed to all differentiated lineages in the BM and spleen (Fig. 1J and Suppl. Fig. 3), and LK, LSK, HSC, MPP, and HPC BM compartments of the secondary recipient mice (Fig. 1K-L). Finally, sorted *Hif-1α^{Δ/Δ}* LSK cells from secondary recipients (16 weeks after secondary transplantation) successfully reconstituted long-term multilineage haematopoiesis in tertiary recipients (Fig. 1M-N). Complete *Hif-1α* deletion was maintained for the duration of these experiments (Fig. 1O). Therefore, self-

renewing long-term HSCs do not critically require *Hif-1α* to maintain their pool upon the stress of serial transplantation.

To test the cell-autonomous role of *Hif-1α* in HSC stress responses, we employed *Hif-1α^{fl/fl};Vav-iCre* mice in which *Hif-1α* is conditionally deleted specifically from haematopoietic cells using a codon-improved Cre (iCre)^{5,8}. *Hif-1α^{fl/fl};Vav-iCre* and control mice received 3 doses of 5-fluorouracil (5-FU) and were analysed 10 days after the last 5-FU administration (Fig. 1P). We also analysed untreated *Hif-1α^{fl/fl};Vav-iCre* and control mice that did not receive 5-FU. While 5-FU-treated mice had decreased survival compared to untreated mice, we observed no differences in survival between 5-FU-treated *Hif-1α^{fl/fl};Vav-iCre* and control mice (Fig. 1Q). 5-FU-treated *Hif-1α^{fl/fl};Vav-iCre* and control mice had comparable total BM cellularity, and BM LSK, HSC and LK cell numbers (Fig. 1R). Thus *Hif-1α* is not essential for cell-autonomous HSC maintenance following serial 5-FU administration.

We next determined the long-term consequences of *Hif-1α* deletion from the haematopoietic system. We transplanted unfractionated BM cells from untreated *Hif-1α^{fl/fl};Mx1-Cre* or control mice, administered plpC and analysed the primary recipients 32 weeks after plpC treatment (Fig. 2A). PB and BM analyses indicated that loss of *Hif-1α* did not affect long-term multilineage haematopoiesis (Fig. 2B-C), or donor-derived chimerism in the stem and progenitor cell compartments of the BM (Fig. 2D-E) and spleens (data not shown) of the recipient mice 32 weeks after plpC treatment. Moreover, LSK cells of both genotypes equally reconstituted long-term multilineage haematopoiesis in secondary recipients (Fig. 2F-G) and evenly contributed to the stem and progenitor cell compartments of the recipients (Fig. 2H). Efficient *Hif-1α* deletion was confirmed by PCR on genomic DNA from donor-derived cells (Fig. 2I). Given that donor-derived HSCs in this experiment have undergone long-term stress and are very rare in secondary recipients, to perform tertiary transplantation assays, instead of re-transplanting purified LSK cells we transplanted unfractionated BM cells harvested from secondary recipients 16 weeks post transplantation. BM cells of both genotypes equally generated multilineage haematopoiesis in tertiary recipients (Fig. 2J-K). Efficient *Hif-1α* gene deletion was maintained for the duration of the serial transplantation experiment (Fig. 2L). Thus, HSCs with chronic *Hif-1α* deficiency sustain

normal steady-state multilineage haematopoiesis and display normal regenerative capacity upon serial transplantation.

Finally, we set out to delete *Hif-1α* more broadly from the BM using *Mx1-Cre*, which in addition to haematopoietic cells, also recombines in the BM microenvironment¹³. *Hif-1α^{fl/fl};Mx1-Cre* and control mice received 6 doses of plpC and were analysed 30 days after the last injection (Suppl. Fig. 4A). plpC-treated *Hif-1α^{fl/fl};Mx1-Cre* and control mice had comparable numbers of nucleated BM cells, LSK cells, and HSC, MPP, HPC-1 and HPC-2 populations (Suppl. Fig. 4B). We next treated *Hif-1α^{fl/fl};Mx1-Cre* and control mice with 6 doses of plpC followed by 2 doses of 5-FU (Suppl. Fig. 4C). We found that a combined stress of plpC treatment and subsequent 5-FU administration resulted in substantially decreased survival of these mice (Suppl. Fig. 4D). Importantly however, there was no difference in survival of plpC- and 5-FU-treated *Hif-1α^{fl/fl};Mx1-Cre* and control mice. Therefore, *Mx1-Cre*-mediated deletion of *Hif-1α* had no impact on HSC numbers or their ability to respond to 5-FU.

HSCs are constantly exposed to local hypoxia within the BM^{14,15} and the low oxygen tension has been proposed to protect HSCs¹⁶. Takubo et al.⁴ found a defect in HSC self-renewal upon *Hif-1α* deletion and suggested that *Hif-1α* is an important mediator of HSC functions. Here we set out to acutely induce deletion of *Hif-1α* in the haematopoietic system and determine its short-term and long-term impact on HSC maintenance. We found that inactivation of *Hif-1α* did not compromise survival of HSCs 2 weeks after gene ablation and unstressed *Hif-1α^{Δ/Δ}* HSCs self-renewed equally efficiently compared to control counterparts upon serial transplantation. Furthermore, deletion of *Hif-1α* had no long-term consequences for maintenance of unstressed HSCs within 32 weeks after plpC administration and did not compromise their ability to repopulate recipient mice upon serial transplantation. Different conclusions from our study and that of Takubo et al. may result from discrepancies in experimental designs. While they serially transplanted LSK cells from plpC-treated *Hif-1α^{fl/fl};Mx1-Cre* mice, we conducted our serial transplantation assays using *Hif-1α^{Δ/Δ}* LSK cells sorted from plpC-treated WT chimeric recipient mice harbouring *Hif-1α^{fl/fl};Mx1-Cre* BM cells. Given that *Mx1-Cre* recombines also within the BM microenvironment¹² and that *Hif-1α* is required for BM mesenchymal progenitor cell functions¹⁷, *Hif-1α* deletion from the BM microenvironment

may have affected HSC functions, thus contributing to the phenotypes observed by Takubo et al. Finally, to test the cell-autonomous role of *Hif-1α* in ageing, Takubo et al. transplanted *Hif-1α^{fl/fl};Mx1-Cre* BM cells into recipient mice and administered plpC 4 months later. While they did not observe any differences 4 months after plpC treatment, 11 months after plpC treatment they found that the level of repopulation by *Hif-1α*-deficient BM cells was decreased. This raises a possibility that the cell-autonomous *Hif-1α* deficiency causes HSC defects only when exposed to an ageing BM microenvironment.

In conclusion, our data presented here, taken together with our previous findings that *Hif-2α* is dispensable for HSC maintenance⁵, suggest that hypoxia impacts on HSC functions in a *Hif-1*- and *Hif-2*-independent manner. We conclude that despite the hypoxic nature of the BM microenvironment, self-renewing HSCs do not critically require intrinsic *Hif-1α* to maintain their pool and sustain long-term multilineage haematopoiesis.

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Author Contribution

K.R.K. designed experiments and wrote the manuscript. P.J.R. and T.L.H. helped with experimental designs. M.V., C.Sepulveda and C.Subramani performed all experiments. A.V.G., J.M., L.A., T.I.P., J.P., H.L., A.V., A.D.D., and D.G. helped with experiments.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Figure Legends

Figure 1. Haematopoiesis-specific deletion of *Hif-1α* does not affect HSC survival and maintenance, and their ability to respond to 5-FU-induced stress. (A) Experimental design. 500,000 donor-derived (CD45.2⁺) unfractionated BM cells from untreated *Hif-1α^{fl/fl}*; *Mx1-Cre* and control (without *Mx1-Cre*) mice were transplanted into lethally irradiated syngeneic CD45.1⁺/CD45.2⁺ recipient mice (together with 500,000 CD45.1⁺ competitor BM cells). Two independent donors were used per genotype. 8 weeks post-transplantation, the mice received 6 sequential doses of plpC over a period of 10 days (every alternate day) and were analysed 2 weeks after last dose of plpC. CD45.2⁺ LSK cells from the primary recipients were serially transplanted into secondary and tertiary recipients. (B) Percentage of CD45.2⁺ donor-derived cells 8 weeks post-transplantation in the peripheral blood (PB) of primary recipient mice prior to plpC treatment (n=5-6 per group). (C) Representative gel showing PCR amplification of genomic DNA from donor-derived CD45.2⁺ fraction of the PB of plpC-treated recipient mice 2 weeks after last plpC injection. WT – wild-type allele, Δ – excised allele, fl – undeleted conditional allele. For PCR controls we used genomic DNA from c-Kit⁺ cells from BM of *Hif-1α^{+/+}*, *Hif-1α^{fl/fl}* and *Hif-1α^{fl/fl}*; *Vav-iCre* mice. (D) Percentage of CD45.2⁺ donor-derived cells in PB 2 weeks after the last plpC injection (n=5-6 per group). (E) Percentage of CD45.2⁺ cells in the unfractionated BM (total BM cells), and myeloid (CD11b⁺Gr1⁺), B lymphoid (CD19⁺B220⁺) and erythroid (Ter119⁺) cell compartments of the primary recipient mice. Data are mean ± SEM (n=5-6 per group). (F) Percentage of CD45.2⁺ donor-derived cells measured in BM Lin⁻Sca-1⁻c-Kit⁺ (LK) and Lin⁻c-Kit⁺Sca-1⁺ (LSK) cell compartments of the primary recipients. Data are mean ± SEM (n=5-6 per group). (G) Percentage of CD45.2⁺ donor-derived cells in LSK CD48⁻CD150⁺ HSC, LSK CD48⁻CD150⁻ MPP, and primitive progenitor (LSK CD48⁺CD150⁻ HPC-1 and LSK CD48⁺CD150⁺ HPC-2) cell compartments of primary recipients. Data are mean ± SEM (n=5-6 per group). (H) PB chimerism in secondary recipients of control and *Hif-1α^{Δ/Δ}* LSK cells sorted from BM of the primary recipients. Data are mean ± SEM (n=6 per group). (I) Representative gel showing efficient deletion of the conditional alleles of *Hif-1α* in the CD45.2⁺ BM cells of secondary recipients 16 weeks after transplantation. For PCR controls we used genomic DNA from c-Kit⁺ cells from BM of *Hif-1α^{+/+}*, *Hif-1α^{fl/fl}* and *Hif-1α^{fl/fl}*; *Vav-iCre* mice. (J) Percentage of CD45.2⁺ cells in total BM, myeloid, B lymphoid,

and erythroid cell compartments of the secondary recipient mice 16 weeks post-transplantation. Data are mean \pm SEM (n=6 per group). **(K-L)** Percentage of CD45.2⁺ cells in BM stem and progenitor cell compartments of the secondary recipient mice 16 weeks post-transplantation. Data are mean \pm SEM (n=6 per group). **(M)** Results of the tertiary transplantation assay. The graph shows the percentage of tertiary recipients with long-term multilineage reconstitution (>0.5% of donor-derived myeloid and lymphoid cells in BM) 16 weeks after tertiary transplantation of *Hif-1 α* ^{Δ/Δ} and control LSK cells sorted from BM of the secondary recipients. Data are mean \pm SEM (n=12-19 per group) **(N)** Percentage of CD45.2⁺ cells in the BM haematopoietic compartments of tertiary recipient mice 16 weeks after transplantation (n=12-19 per group). **(O)** Representative gel showing efficient deletion of the conditional alleles of *Hif-1 α* in the CD45.2⁺ BM cells of tertiary recipients 16 weeks after transplantation. For PCR controls we used genomic DNA from c-Kit⁺ cells from BM of *Hif-1 α* ^{+/+}, *Hif-1 α* ^{fl/fl} and *Hif-1 α* ^{fl/fl};Vav-iCre mice. **(P)** Experimental design. *Hif-1 α* ^{fl/fl};Vav-iCre and control mice received 3 sequential doses of 5-FU (150 mg/kg; 10 days apart) and were analysed 10 days after the last 5-FU administration. In parallel, untreated *Hif-1 α* ^{fl/fl};Vav-iCre and control mice that did not receive 5-FU were also analysed. **(Q)** Kaplan-Meier survival curve of *Hif-1 α* ^{fl/fl};Vav-iCre and control mice treated with 5-FU (i.e. +5-FU) (n=7-8 per group) or those that were not treated with 5-FU (i.e. -5-FU) (n=4-6 per group). Arrows in the graph indicate 5-FU administration. **(R)** Total numbers (per 2 femurs and 2 tibias) of BM white blood cells, LSK cells, HSCs and LK cells from the mice described in Fig. 1P-Q. Data are mean \pm SEM (n=4-6 per group). At least two independent experiments were performed for all analyses.

Figure 2. Prolonged *Hif-1α* deficiency does not affect the steady-state maintenance of HSCs and their regenerative capacity.

(A) Experimental design. Primary recipient mice were transplanted with 500,000 donor-derived unfractionated BM cells from untreated *Hif-1α^{fl/fl}*; *Mx1-Cre* and control mice (together with 500,000 CD45.1⁺ competitor BM cells). 8 weeks post-transplantation, the mice received 6 doses of plpC. The mice were analysed 32 weeks after the last dose of plpC. CD45.2⁺ LSK cells from the primary recipients were transplanted into secondary recipients. 2x10⁶ total BM cells from secondary recipients were transplanted into tertiary recipients together with 200,000 CD45.1⁺ unfractionated BM cells. (B) CD45.2⁺ donor-derived PB chimerism 20, 24, 28 and 32 weeks after the last dose of plpC. Mean ± SEM (n=5-7 per group). (C) Percentage of CD45.2⁺ cells in total BM, myeloid, B lymphoid, and erythroid cell compartments of primary recipients 32 weeks after plpC treatment. Data are mean ± SEM (n=5-7 per group). (D-E) Percentage of CD45.2⁺ cells in the indicated haematopoietic compartments of the primary recipients. Data are mean ± SEM (n=5-7 per group). (F) LSK cells of indicated genotypes were pooled from primary recipients 32 weeks after plpC treatment and transplanted into secondary recipients. The graph shows CD45.2⁺ donor-derived PB chimerism in secondary recipient mice 4, 12 and 16 weeks after transplantation. Data are mean ± SEM (n=4-7 per group). (G) CD45.2⁺ donor-derived chimerism within the total BM cell fraction, and myeloid, B lymphoid and erythroid cell compartments of secondary recipient mice 16 weeks after transplantation. Data are mean ± SEM (n=4-7 per group). (H) Percentage of CD45.2⁺ cells in the indicated haematopoietic stem and progenitor cell compartments of the secondary recipients. Mean ± SEM (n=4-7 per group). (I) PCR amplification of genomic DNA from donor-derived CD45.2⁺ cell fraction of the PB of secondary recipient mice 12 weeks post-transplantation. For PCR controls we used genomic DNA from c-Kit⁺ cells from BM of *Hif-1α^{+/+}*, *Hif-1α^{fl/fl}* and *Hif-1α^{fl/fl}*; *Vav-iCre* mice. (J) Results of the tertiary transplantation assays. The graph depicts the percentage of tertiary recipients with long-term multilineage reconstitution (>0.5% of donor-derived myeloid and lymphoid cells in PB) 16 weeks after tertiary transplantation of 2x10⁶ total BM cells obtained from the secondary recipients (n=5-10 per genotype). (K) Percentage of CD45.2⁺ cells in white blood cell (total) compartment, and myeloid, B lymphoid, and T lymphoid cell compartments of PB in tertiary recipients 16 weeks after transplantation. Data are mean ± SEM (n=5-10 per

group). (L) *Hif-1α* gene deletion was confirmed by PCR on genomic DNA from donor-derived CD45.2⁺ cell fraction of the BM of tertiary recipients 16 weeks post-transplantation. For PCR controls we used genomic DNA from c-Kit⁺ cells from BM of *Hif-1α*^{+/+}, *Hif-1α*^{fl/fl} and *Hif-1α*^{fl/fl};Vav-*iCre* mice. At least two independent experiments were performed for all analyses.

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Figure 1

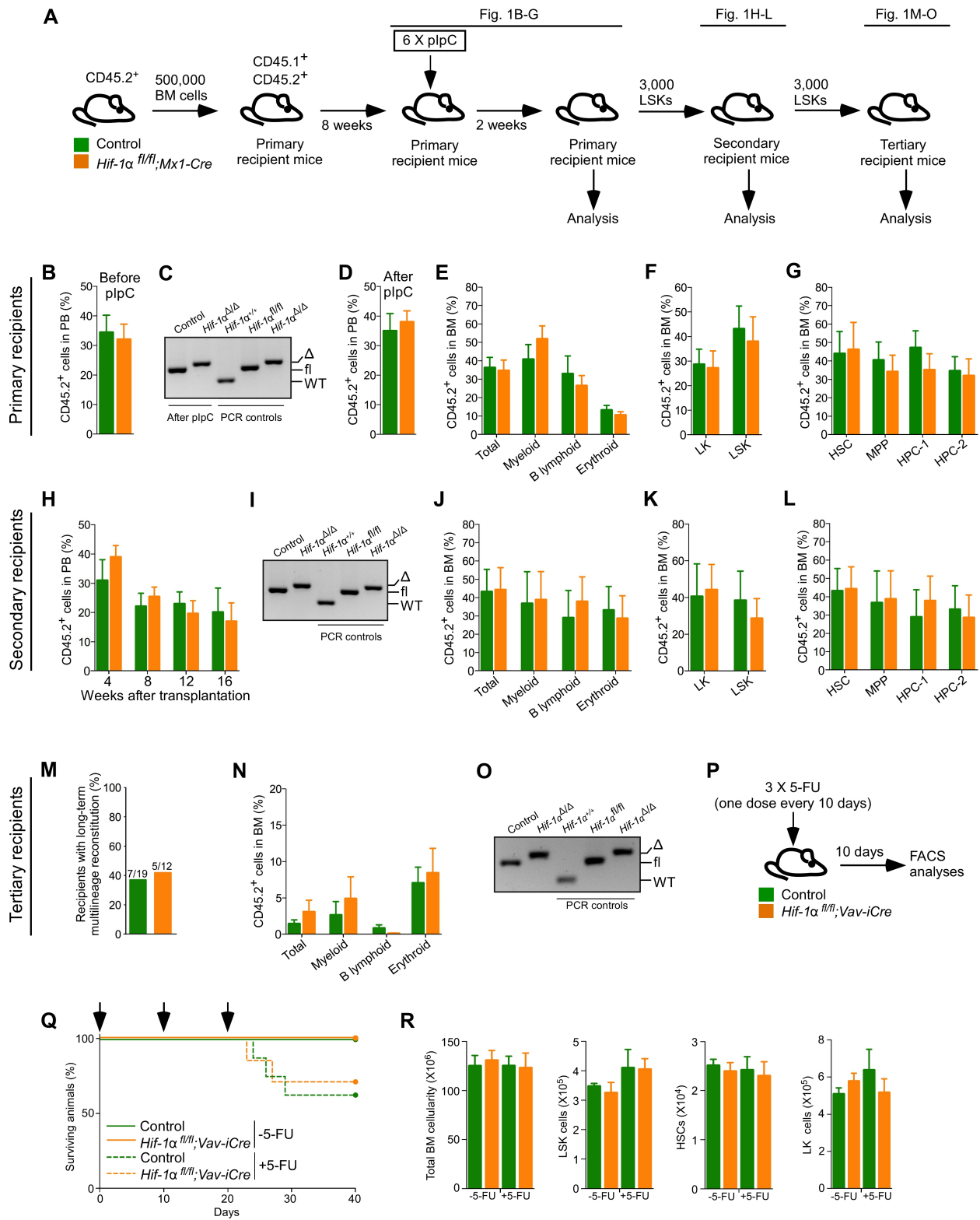


Figure 2

